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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and assess the choice of Jerusalem (Israel) for the 66th IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) Council and General Conference (Jerusalem, Israel, August 13-18, 2000) and to provide some recommendations and suggestions for similar situations in the future. The paper asserts that in selecting Jerusalem, IFLA failed to fulfill its aims, its General Conference goals, its General Conference theme for that year, and its criteria for selecting a location. Following an introduction, the first section describes results of the selection of Jerusalem, including a boycott by Arab and Islamic countries and the withdrawal of the Arab Federation for Libraries and Information from the conference altogether. The second section discusses the inescapably political nature of the conference. The third section evaluates the Jerusalem conference. (Contains 13 references.) (MES)

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IFLA IN JERUSALEM
"Information for co-operation : creating the global library for the future"

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Honestly, I was very hesitant in preparing this speech. Talking about Jerusalem in particular (and not any other city) has been for 53 years (since 1948) an extremely sensitive issue. Being a FAIFE member (Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression) and being in a "Free Country" I will try to do this freely yet objectively.

The purpose of my speech is (a) to analyze and assess the choice of Jerusalem for the 66th IFLA General Conference and (b) to provide some recommendations and suggestions for similar situations in the future.

By selecting Jerusalem IFLA has failed to fulfill:

1- Its aims,
2- Its General Conference goals,
3- Its General Conference theme (for that year), and
4- Its criteria for selecting a location

Aims:

IFLA is an independent international non-governmental association. Its aims are to promote international, understanding, cooperation, discussion, research and development in all fields of library activity and information science, and to provide a body through which librarianship can be represented in matters of international interest. In other words IFLA is intended to have a global reach in the field of library and information science.

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General Conference goals:

"IFLA General Conference is the most important professional international, multilingual, multicultural event within the library and information community."

According to the majority of the delegates, the most rewarding aspect of the conference is the interaction and communication with colleagues from all over the world in addition to building friendship and the idea of global perspective within our profession.

General Conference theme:

"Information for co-operation : creating the global library for the future"

Criteria for selecting a location:

Deciding on a location is a "serious process" according to Ms. Nancy John, IFLA's First VP. In order to consider a potential site, IFLA board must receive very detailed information about the hosting city that must meet several criteria, including geographic diversity whereby IFLA is capable of "reaching people in all different venues" (either delegates, businesses or associations).

Results:

The result was a total boycott by Arab and Islamic countries (even some African countries like Zimbabwe) to attend IFLA's 66th General Conference. Furthermore, the Arab Federation for Libraries and Information (AFLI) had withdrawn completely; instead it held its own annual meeting in Cairo around the same time of IFLA (August 12-17, 2000), eventhough the AFLI Annual Meeting is held in October.

Therefore IFLA Board has made it impossible for members from Arab, Islamic and few African countries to attend. Attendance in Jerusalem totaled around 1800 (down from Bangkok's 1980 registrants in 1999), which included 400 from Israel, 265 from the USA, 207 from the Russian Federation, 88 from France and 85 from the United Kingdom.

Attendance in Cairo (AFLI) totaled more than 300 which included 18 Arab and Islamic countries and they were: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, UAE, and Yemen.

IFLA's organizers claim that when the selection of Jerusalem for the 2000 conference was made over 5 years ago, in 1995 in Istanbul, no formal protest was launched until November 1999 when it was too late to select another site. Apparently, the conflict was brewing since 1997 between AFLI and IFLA. According to Mr. Saad Azzahri Alghamdi, Secretary General of AFLI, several requests from AFLI were sent to IFLA to change the site for "Jerusalem is not the appropriate place to hold the conference." In its part, IFLA board offered to send a member to the Cairo meeting but the offer was declined in an e-mail message from Dr. Abdeljelil Temimi of Tunisia, AFLI President at the time. Unfortunately, the attempts were unsuccessful.

Thus, the concluding statement of AFLI affirmed that "all speakers reminded in their speeches that the timing of the Conference is a reaction to the 66th IFLA's General Conference in Jerusalem, ignoring all international resolutions concerning the Holy City and what would lead to confirming the Israeli occupation. They insisted that the Arab character of Jerusalem is above any deal, due to its [cultural] position and the historical heritage and religious importance that represents to the Arabs, Muslims and

Christians." The Conference also issued a special statement called "Jerusalem Declaration" which included six declarations, and a clear message condemning IFLA for "giving an explicit recognition of Israel sovereignty over the Holy City."

Inescapably political:

Despite IFLA efforts to prove that its 66th General Conference was a non-political non-governmental organization and that it was based only on professional aims, the Conference was inescapably political. As proof I shall cite some facts:

1. Jerusalem was and continues to be a political issue even on universal scale.

2. As a FAIFE member, I have received from FAIFE Office before the Conference a document entitled: Jerusalem 2000: Considerations concerning the 66th IFLA General Conference in Jerusalem. This document included a detailed explanation of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Jerusalem issue citing all relevant UN resolutions.

3. Two opening sessions proved the contrary. The first delivered by Mr. Zevulun Orlev, a Knessett member who unexpectedly delivered his speech entirely in Hebrew to an audience mostly without translation headphones. This was considered flatly a political statement. Moreover, Mr. Al Kagan, a US delegate, opined at a joint meeting between FAIFE and CLM (Copyright and other legal matters) (IFLA committees), that Mr. Zevulun had deliberately politicized the session by welcoming delegates "to the unified capital of the Israeli State".
   The other session delivered by Mr. Shlomo Avineri, a political science professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who tried to explain the Arab-Israeli conflict and who gave some background information about the Israeli-Palestinian discussions with President Clinton (at the time), but he presented it from the Israeli perspective.

4. Most lecturers and speakers issued political observations in their speeches. For example:

   - IFLA President Christine Deschamps of France in her opening remarks included a plea "for professional solidarity".

   - At a reception on the grounds of Hebrew University, Rector Menachem-Ben Sasson echoed that the Jerusalem Conference was "a professional statement not a political statement", and he declared that "Jerusalem is open to the world." IS IT?

   - The Swedish journalist, Arne Ruth, one of the guest lecturers, suggested that "Sharing Jerusalem is the only solution." He also concluded that the Western press "fell into the trap of accepting that it (the Jerusalem issue) is a religious conflict, when it is a political one."

Evaluation of the Jerusalem Conference:

The evaluation of the conference which has been prepared in November 1999, by Niels Ole Pors, Associate Prof. at the Dept. of Library and Information Management at the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Denmark, and which was based upon responses to questionnaires given to all attendees, shows the following:

1. In general, the Conference as a whole was the least successful conference of the last 4 IFLA conferences.

2. From the comments, it was evident that many delegates in some ways found that the conference took place in a politicized environment.

3. Many participants thought that some of the welcome speeches by Israelis' high-ranking persons were too political for a conference of this kind.
4. Many delegates first impressions of the country were not that positive. "People arrived in a very security-oriented airport".

5. Smaller proportion was just attendees (about 29.3%). A bigger proportion than the previous 4 years had some kind of official IFLA functions (46% were Standing Committees).

6. The nationality figures indicated that the proportion of delegates from 3rd World countries (17.7%) and Eastern Europe (2.2%) was smaller than normal. Yet a bigger proportion was from USA delegates (23.9%) and West Europe (31.5%). The Israelis represented 8.7% of the delegates.

To summarize, the evaluation stated that the highly political environment of the conference and the debate about its place (Jerusalem), including the Arab boycott (which was considered one of the drawbacks of the conference) had influenced the size and composition of the participants. It meant that participants from 3rd World Countries played a less significant role during the conference than in the previous 4 conferences. Earlier evaluations indicated that 3rd World delegates as an average have a more positive attitude towards the IFLA professional meetings and sessions than delegates from Western Europe and the US. This factor by itself had resulted in a less positive evaluation.

Religious significance of Jerusalem:

It is evident that throughout my speech I have separated the issue of Jerusalem from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Several Arab and Islamic countries have already signed peace treaties with Israel like Egypt and Jordan but they have not todate agreed upon the identity of Jerusalem's Old City. Yet, as per the United Nations Security Council resolutions, "the Old City, with the exception of the Jewish quarter and adjoining Western Wall Plaza, should be ceded to Palestine" (i.e., boundaries of 1967). (UN Resolutions 267 and 726).

We ask ourselves why for 38 centuries, since Jerusalem known existence, which is smaller than half a square mile, has been the scene of many dramatic events and the cause of many wars. It is certainly because of its spiritual and religious status, Jerusalem, the city of prophets, is the cradle of the three religions of the world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Jerusalem became the Jewish national and religious center after its conquest by King David (c. 1000 B.C.) from its original inhabitants who were not of Jewish religion such as Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites and other races. Their rebellion against the Roman occupation resulted in their exile from the city and their dispersion in the world.
Upon the death and resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem, Christianity emerged, and the city was rebuilt as a Christian city. Since the reign of the Roman Empire, the city remains todate a center of Christian pilgrimage.

As for the Muslims of the world Jerusalem has a fundamental role. In 620, almost one and a half year before the Prophet Mohammed's emigration to Madina, he was taken by the Angel Gabriel from Makkah to Jerusalem where he stood at the Sacred Rock, ascended to heavens and met with many prophets and messengers who had been assembled for him, led them in prayers, returned to Jerusalem and was transported back to Makkah. Due to this event Muslims around the world have a deep devotion and spiritual connection to Jerusalem.

Conclusion:

Allow me to remind you that over the last years there have been similar situations where IFLA members debated on various choices of venues, for instance Moscow 1991, Havana 1994 (where it was impossible for American members to attend), Istanbul 1995 and Beijing 1996. The focus in these cases was on the human rights situation and in particular the lack of freedom of expression and freedom of access to information.

The choice of Jerusalem – a contested place in this world – puts IFLA in the position of depriving automatically many librarians from the Arab and Islamic countries of their right to attend that conference.

Therefore, I am still unable to answer a very important question. Why had IFLA board selected Jerusalem for their 66th General Conference? Maybe the Board (as we are all striving for) made the assumption that by 2000 the Arab-Israeli Conflict and the Jerusalem issue will have been settled. Unfortunately, it is not the case. The situation lately has become much more somber where we see and read every day about non-stop violence with dreadful incidents and horrible deaths.

Finally, I kindly request from IFLA Board to invest more time in selecting properly their sites and that an alternative to the Jerusalem Conference should be selected like holding the Conference in an Arab country which is accessible globally.

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